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ABSTRACT

A study examined the different strategies used by speakers of Egyptian Arabic to ward off the potential effects of the evil eye, specifically the responding strategies to compliments perceived as invocations of evil as it relates to the gender of the recipient of the compliment and the social context in which the compliment takes place. Social context was defined as the social distance between interlocutors, small or large. Subjects were 40 (25 males, 15 females) Egyptian teachers of English-as-a-Second Language attending a teacher training program in the United States, only one of whom claimed not to believe in the evil eye. An open-ended discourse-completion interview; including 12 situations, was conducted with each subject in colloquial Egyptian Arabic in his or her own residence. The resulting 480 compliment responses obtained were analyzed for strategy type. The most common was complaining about the object of the compliment. Other frequently-used strategies included complimenting the speaker, evasion, and humor. The relationship of gender and social distance in the use of each of these strategies, and the apparent intent of the strategies, were analyzed. A list of formula phrases related to beliefs about the evil eye and the 12 test situations are appended. (Contains 22 references and 2 figures.) (MSE)

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Title: **Pragmatics of the Evil Eye in Egyptian Arabic**

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The destructive power of the evil eye is a belief of central importance to the daily lives of many Egyptians as well as most Arabs and Middle Easterners. Most Egyptians believe that the evil eye (*ain el-hassud*) is invoked when others express admiration toward their valuable possessions or family members in a way that indicates envy, which is believed to be the motive behind the evil eye. Ghosh (1983) and Wikan (1996) distinguish between two distinct concepts: "*ghira*" (jealousy) and "*el-hassad*" (invoking the evil eye); "*ghira*" is wishing to obtain something similar to that of others, whereas "*el-hassad*" is wishing others to lose the object of admiration or have it damaged. According to Ghosh (1983), the consequences of being a victim of the evil eye could range from miscarriages to having fatal car crashes, (see Ghosh, 1983; Blackman, 1968; Early, 1993 for further examples).

Spooner (1976) distinguishes between witchcraft and the evil eye; witchcraft is considered an extraordinary phenomenon, whereas the evil eye is thought to be an everyday unwilled act. Those who invoke the evil eye seem to have no control over it, and may not even be conscious of why or how they perform such evil deeds (Fakhouri, 1984). Most Egyptians take the evil eye seriously, as Blackman (1968) comments, "To the Egyptian peasants the fear of the evil eye is a very real terror from infancy to old age." Blackman (p. 218). Also, Ghosh (1983) notes,

> "the fear of envy (*hassad*) and of being thought envious regulates an enormous area of village life. There are certain paths in the village that people try to avoid, at the cost of long detours, for they lead past the houses of those known to be envious (p. 213).

Walking down an Egyptian street one encounters numerous manifestations of the belief in the evil eye. Many cars carry bumper stickers of open palms[1], doors have sheep-blood prints of open palms, and people carry blue pebbles and jewelry with religious formulas inscribed on them. All these commodities, which Starrett (1995, p. 53) refers to as "semiotic redundancy," are believed to ward off the evil eye. In fact, it is not just villagers who hold this belief; "Egyptians from most walks of life profess confidence in the efficacy of these objects and use them as a matter of course" (Starrett, 1995). The present paper investigates the manifestations of the belief in the evil eye in everyday colloquial Egyptian Arabic.

The belief in the evil eye is neither unique to certain rural areas in Egypt nor an outdated concept. In Lane, (1966), a posthumous edition, a detailed account of the practices that Egyptians believed to ward off the evil eye is provided as he witnessed them in 1850. He describes the palm prints, the blue beads and the *fasukha*, which refers to attaching a bright object, such a brass decoration, to a valuable possession such as a carriage at that time, to attract the eyes, so that the evil eye would harm it rather than the carriage. The *fasukha* refers also to marring the appearance of valuable objects, for example, hanging an old shoe from the carriage, so that the viewers would find it ugly and the evil eye would not be invoked. Lane (1966) also reports that attaching the

[1] The open palm could be interpreted as a symbol of the hand of Fatima, Prophet Mohammed's daughter, that stands for blessings and good, or "the "*Kaff*", the open palm is "actually the name of God, each finger representing a letter A L L A H,"(Stewart, 1997).

religious formulas *"masha? Allah"* (This is what God has willed), *"allhuma sali alanabi"* (may God bless the prophet) and *"allhu akbar"* (God is great) is the only way to assure the recipient of the compliment that there is no envy involved. These linguistic formulas and practices have undergone little change in the past 150 years (Starrett, 1995).

Fakhouri (1984) provides a brief description of the evil eye practices in the Delta, in the north of Egypt, such as the *fasukha,* the blue beads and the *xamsa we xmesa,* which refers to the number five or the symbol of the open palm (Fakhouri, 1984). Moreover, Fakhouri asserts that the villagers avoid talking to strangers about their families and possessions since it is believed that strangers are more likely to be envious (Fakhouri, 1984, p. 90). He reports that the belief in the evil eye caused complications to his study because during the interviews, many of the villagers were reluctant to provide him information about their families and land lest the evil eye would be invoked. However, when he used the religious formula *"allah yezid we yebarek"* (May God bless and increase), they became more spontaneous and frank in their responses. Blackman's (1986) ethnography on Upper Egypt, the south, has much in common with Fakhouri's study in regard of the evil eye. Both agreed that compliments and favorable comments on attributes highly valued in the Egyptian cultural context were apt to be perceived as invocations of the evil eye unless prefixed with one or more of the specific religious formulas mentioned earlier. These highly valued attributes include family, achievement, personal traits and valuable possessions that are the attributes Egyptians tend to praise

frequently (Nelson, El Bakry & Al Batal, 1993). Moreover, Blackman (1968) asserts that both Muslims and Christians (Copts) share that belief.

The semantic distance between two languages or cultures is a reflection of the systematic differences in perceptions of world events (Hasan, 1984). Due to the semantic distance between American English and Egyptian Arabic, as well as cultural differences, many Egyptians and Arabs see compliments very differently from Americans, and therefore, compliments constitute a potential pitfall for communication breakdowns in intercultural communication contexts, especially since strangers are believed to be more likely to invoke the evil eye (Ghosh, 1983). Nelson et al., (1993) found that Egyptians tend not to compliment strangers whereas Americans would compliment them significantly more frequently. The possibility of cultural misunderstanding seems pronounced since Egyptians believe that, "the evil eye operates more efficiently on certain occasions, such as weddings, feasts, or meal times" (Hamady, 1960, p. 172).

Nydell, (1987) gives an example of a friendship between a Britisher and a Jordanian that was destroyed because the well-intentioned Britisher was thought to invoke the evil eye by praising the other's new car. This incidence is not unique, especially considering that Americans tend to compliment more frequently than Egyptians do, (Nelson, et al, 1993) and compliments are the speech act most likely to be interpreted as an invocation of the evil eye (Hamady, 1960). On the other hand Americans might consider Egyptians ungrateful because they tend to express dissatisfaction and complain as a response to compliments in an attempt to ward off the

evil eye (Wikan, 1996). Interestingly, people with blue eyes are especially suspected of invoking the evil eye (Hamady, 1960). The purpose of this study is to analyze Egyptians' responses to compliments perceived as invocations of the evil eye in an attempt to illustrate the responding strategies and describe the contextual factors that account for the use of such strategies in terms of social distance and gender differences.

Most of the studies that have dealt with the evil eye stem from an anthropological research background. However, many of the speech act studies that investigated Egyptian Arabic, or Arabic in general, overlooked the concept of the evil eye, and the ones that mention it have left out the social contexts that encompass it; religious formulas that accompany compliments are listed with little, if any, elaboration on the metamessages behind them (e.g. Hussein, 1995; Shouby, 1951). This might be attributed to the fact that most of these studies investigated Standard Arabic, which is used only in some academic and religious contexts. To the researcher's knowledge, there has been no study that investigated the evil eye from a pragmatic perspective, i.e. describing and accounting for the compliment responding strategies, and analyzing the contexts considered appropriate for each strategy, which is the focus of the present study.

The information obtained from the study can then be used to better inform North Americans interested in traveling to Egypt or doing business with Egyptians as well as those interested in Arab culture in general by familiarizing them with some of the culture-specific unwritten rules of communication. For teachers of Arabic as a foreign language the findings of this study could provide material for a Culture Capsule, which is a short

classroom presentation aiming to explicate a specific cultural difference between the learners' culture and the target culture as well as its manifestations in the target language. (Al-Batal, 1988). For teachers of English a second/foreign language who deal with Egyptian, or Arab students in general, knowledge of the language learners' cultural background might help account for some of the interlanguage errors that are caused by thinking in the mother tongue and executing the speech act in English. (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993).

Methods

This study examines the different strategies used by native speakers of Egyptian Arabic to ward off the potentially dangerous effects of the evil eye. The dependent variable is the frequencies of occurrence of responding strategies to compliments perceived as invocations of the evil. The independent variables are the gender of the recipient of the compliment and the social context in which the compliment takes place. The social context of the complimenting act is thus operationalized in terms of social distance which refers to the extent an individual identifies with the other interlocutor(s) , (Brown, Detmer, & Hudson, 1995). The social distance variable has two levels, (a) small social distance between the speakers (SSD) such as between friends, colleagues, as well as relatives, and (b) large social distance (LSD) such as in social encounters with acquaintances or complete strangers. The research questions can be stated as: (a) what communicative strategies do Egyptian native speakers of Arabic employ to respond to the compliments they perceive as invocations of the evil eye, and (b) what are the effects, if

any, of social distance and the recipient's gender on the frequency of use for these strategies?

Subjects

The participants in this study were forty Egyptian teachers of English as a foreign language (twenty-five males and fifteen females) attending a teacher training program at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia. The duration of their stay was limited to eight weeks. The majority of them had never been to the U.S. previously, and those who had visited the country before were participants in similar programs. The subjects are all teachers of English as a foreign language in Egyptian public schools, and thus they belong to the upper middle class. They come from fifteen major towns and cities from all over Egypt. Their ages range 27 to 36 with a mean of 31 years. The group included twenty-six Muslims and fourteen Copts (Christians). Only one participant claimed not to believe in the evil eye. He is a 27 year old Copt from a small town in the south of Egypt. All the others professed that they believe in it strongly.

Stimuli

The stimuli comprised twelve open-ended discourse completion items in the form of situations, i.e. an oral discourse completion test. Each situation included a compliment with an invocations of the evil eye as the implicature. Six of these situations took place in contexts where the social distance between interlocutors was small while the other six situations involved large social distance contexts (see appendix 3). The situations compiled for the stimuli had been elicited by e-mail and telephone communications with

Egyptians, in Egypt, belonging to different socio-economic classes. They were asked to relate the last time they encountered a communicative event that led them to believe that the compliment they received was actually an invocation of the evil eye. That method generated a set of forty-four anecdotes. A situation was chosen for the current study only when three or more individuals reported it with similar social distance between the speakers and a similar focus of the compliment. The most frequently reported foci were children and family, money and/or valuable possessions, and health.

The stimulus was designed in Colloquial Egyptian Arabic, which is the language form Egyptians use for everyday communications. The diglossia phenomenon is so pronounced in Egyptian Arabic to the extent that, "the ordinary formal language of the community is one that no one speaks without special effort and no one uses in ordinary conversation" (Ferguson, 1996, p. 25). The rationale for choosing the colloquial form is to collect naturalistic data and to avoid the confounding effect of the language modality that could impose certain constraints on the data, formal and non-authentic responses in this case, (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

Procedure

All the interviews were held in the participants' residences, and took the form of a friendly conversation. Each interview started with an introduction about the study and its purpose (in colloquial Egyptian Arabic), and then the participant's informed consent and permission for tape-recording were obtained. Initially, the participants were asked to give an account of the last time they encountered a situation that involved a verbal invocation

of the evil to introduce the topic and activate the evil-eye schema. Then, the researcher presented the situations preceded by a detailed description of the context including the level of the social distance variable, i.e. whether it is large or small social, and the participants gave their responses in the form of open role play. During the interviews the participants were encouraged to reflect and provide metapragmatic insight into their responses. This procedure provided 480 compliment responses.

The interviews were fully transcribed in Arabic following Grundy's guidelines, i.e. the transcription included speech fillers, pauses, and intonation contours, (Grundy, 1995) and finally coded. The coding was done on the interview scripts to avoid the contaminating factor of decontextualization The coding scheme was based on dividing the spoken discourse into T-units or idea units i.e. each code represents a responding strategy such as complaining, remodeling the compliment or using a religious formula, among others. The frequency of occurrence for each strategy was calculated for each independent variable: social distance and gender.

Results

The most frequently reported responding strategy to the stimuli was complaining to the speaker about the object of the compliment, which was employed 34% of the 850 instances reported in the interviews (see table 1). For example, one situation involved a family reunion when a relative observed the host's little daughter and said, *(el-bint di a'liha thaka? El dinia,)* "How cute! This girl is very intelligent." One of the participants responded, "Thank God she is fine. She was ill all morning and almost broke her arm a

few days ago." Interestingly, the participants asserted that the mishaps included in the complaint do not have be real events; however, they are not considered lies. In the case of small social distance (SSD) the females tended to utilize complaints less frequently than the males did, 12.5% as opposed to 31.6% respectively. In the contexts that involved large social distance the female participants were inclined to use complaints more frequently that the males did; 48.1% compared to 19.1%.

The purpose behind such a responding strategy, which might sound awkward to many Americans, was explained by one of the participants, as "The most important thing is not to keep the other person (the giver of the compliment) sad and feeling inferior. I have to make him feel good." Therefore, it can be inferred that complaining, as a response to a compliment, is a strategy used to evade threats to the social harmony caused by the compliment, by making the speaker, who is suspected of invoking the evil eye feel good about him/herself, and thus impeding that invocation.

Another frequently reported strategy for responding to compliments perceived as invocations of the evil eye is complimenting the speaker. This strategy occurred 12.6% of all the reported responses. The female participants used more compliments in the contexts that entailed small social distance (19.2%) than in the situations that took place in large social distance contexts (7.8%). On the other hand, the male participants used compliments only 7.6% in small social distance and 16.6% in large social distance contexts. In one situation, the participant was complimented by a friend on speaking English fluently, and the response was, "This is nothing compared to your English. You

are almost a native speaker." One participant clarified that the purpose of complimenting in this context is to "break the speaker's eye," i.e., it prevents the speaker from invoking the evil eye by a counter compliment that reminds the giver of the original compliment of the skills he/she has, and thus changing the focus of admiration.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Egyptian Female and Male Responding Strategies to Compliments Perceived as Invocations of the Evil Eye

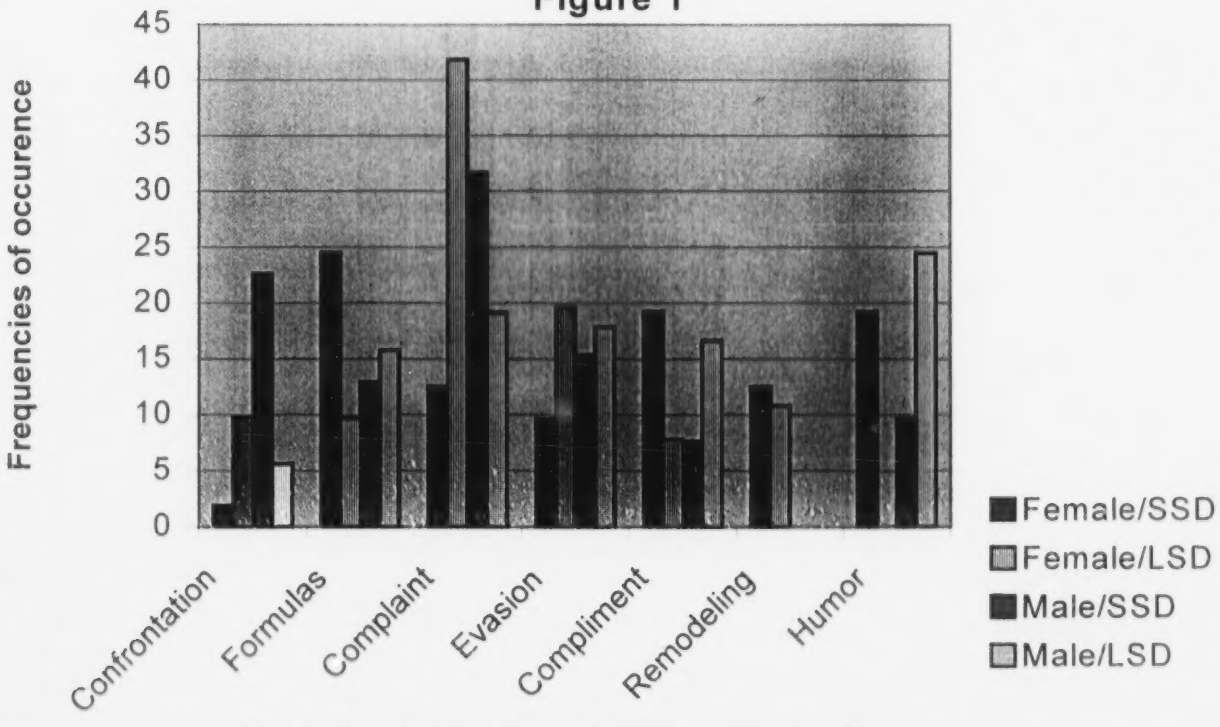
	Females		Males	
Responding strategies	Small social distance	large social distance	Small social distance	large social distance
Complaint	12.5%	41.8%	31.6%	19.1%
Compliment	19.2%	7.8%	7.6%	16.6%
Evasion	9.6%	19.6%	15.3%	17.8%
Humor	19.2%	0%	9.6%	24.5%
Confrontation	1.9%	9.8%	22.6%	5.6%
Formulas	24.5%	9.7%	12.9%	15.7%
Remodeling	12.5%	10.8%	0%	0%

In 10.2% of the responses the participants employed evasion when responding to the compliments that comprised the stimuli. The evasion strategy involves drawing overgeneralizations that assure the giver of the compliment that there is nothing special or unique about the attribute of the compliment, and thus implying that there is no motive for being envious and invoking the evil eye. For instance, when complimented on getting a job in a well established firm in the United Arab Emirates, one participant responded as, "Everyone goes there. They did not come and ask for me of all the people. It is just a

matter of luck." Another participant commented that she would use that responding strategy because it is not "embarrassing" to the giver of the compliment.

Gender seems to be a determining factor where evasion in concerned, as in small social distance contexts the male participants used this face saving strategy more frequently than the females did; 15.3% in contrast of 9.6% respectively. At the same time, when the compliment occurred in a large social distance context, the males used that same strategy less frequently than did the females; 17.8% compared to 19.6% in that case, it seems that Egyptian females, unlike males, tend to be more keen on maintaining social harmony and saving others' face in close relationships.

Figure 1



Egyptian females and males responding strategies to compliments perceived as incovations of the evil eye

One alternative and context-specific strategy that was employed relatively frequently (23% of all frequencies) was *humor* i.e. ridiculing the elements of the context in an exaggerated manner. One participant reported, (*teklib elmawDu' hizar, we elkul yehka mabsut*), "You turn the whole thing into a joke, and everybody becomes happy." For example, in one situation the addressee was asked to help push a car that broke down. Once he pushed the car it moved and the engine started. A bypasser observed the scene and commented, *(dah inta 'alek SiHa tehid gibal!),* "You have enough health to devastate mountains." The response was "Yeah. Yesterday I was fighting with that fellow, Hugan the wrestler. I kicked the life out of him. He is in hospital now with the two guys who tried to rescue him."

It seems that the purpose of this strategy is to avoid the possible confrontation resulting from interpreting the compliment as an invocation of the evil eye. This is achieved by distracting the speaker with the joking response in the hope that entertaining the speaker would make him/her happy and reduce the "high psychological charge of envy," as one participant explained. Thus, the complimented person protects him/herself and at the same time maintains social harmony by saving the compliment giver's face.

The use of humor was limited only to the contexts that involved small social distance for the female participants, 19.2%. Interestingly, the males used that strategy rather frequently in large social distance contexts, 24.5%. and less frequently in small social distance contexts, 9.6%. Such differences indicate that in large social distance contexts Egyptian males tend to be more likely to use humor as a face saving strategy

than females who might complain to achieve the same effect. The fact that Egyptian females never used the humor as a responding strategy in LSD contexts can be attributed to the Egyptian social and cultural norms that would not encourage the use of humor in such situations.

All of the above discussed strategies can be labeled as face saving strategies; however, the participants sometimes employed face threatening responding strategies such as confrontation, which occurred 9.5% of the cases. For example, when complimented by a colleague on being a successful private tutor, one participant responded as, "Stop invoking the evil eye. Have mercy! And if you will envy what I have, I will do the same for you." In this particular case the recipient of the compliment is expressing fear of the potentially dangerous effects of the compliment.

The analysis indicates that confrontation is not more likely to occur in responses to compliments on certain attributes rather than others whereas social distance and the recipient's gender seemed to have a pronounced effect on the choice of that strategy. The female respondents employed the confrontation strategy only 1.9% in SSD contexts and 9.8% in LSD contexts, while the male participants used it 22.6% in SSD contexts and 5.6% in LSD situations. Such differences indicate that Egyptian females, contrary to males, are more keen on maintaining social harmony in close relations and therefore would be less likely to employ such a direct and face threatening strategy in responding to a compliment.

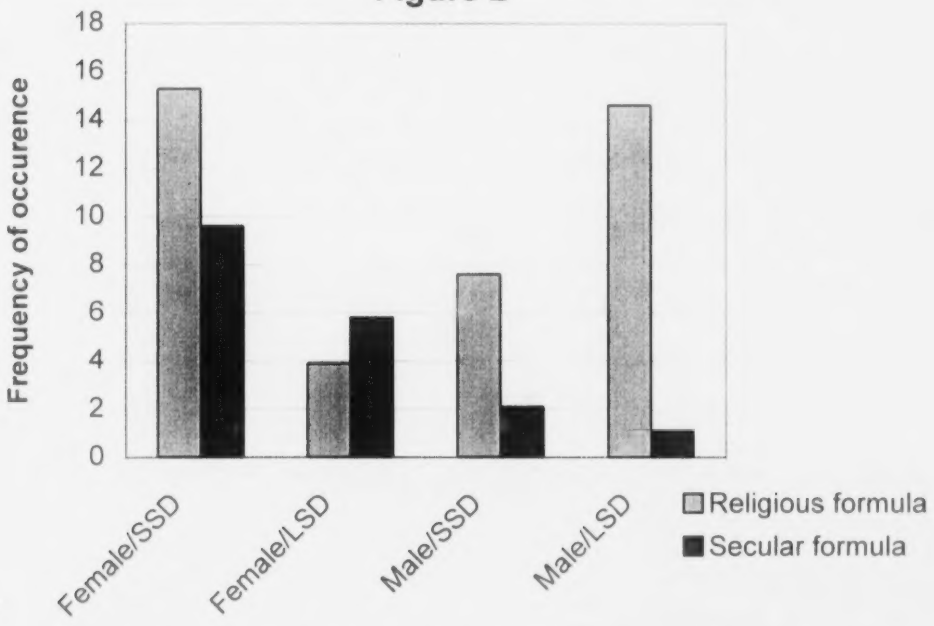
Another face threatening strategy, which is the most direct of all the reported responding strategies, is reciting a certain excerpt from the Koran aloud, or using a religious or a secular formula (see appendix 1). For example, in one situation the giver of the compliment said, "Lucky you! A teacher of English, you own a house, a shop and now buying a car." a participant responded as, "*Allhu akbar 'fi wishak'*" (God is almighty in your face.) Such a response would be interpreted as to carry the metamessage, "I seek the power of God against you." This strategy was employed 15.2% of the time, and therefore it is one of the most frequently used strategies.

In terms of directness, secular formulas can be considered rather less direct than the religious ones. For example, it is believed that mentioning the number five, which represents the palm of the hand, would have the effect of reminding the giver of the compliment of the possible dangers of that compliment and justifies the recipient's use of such a defensive strategy. When one participant was complimented on her son's academic success, she responded as, "Poor boy! He gets up at five in the morning to go to school, and afterwards he attends five tutoring sessions. When he gets home he studies for five hours, and every Thursday (the fifth day of the week) he plays with his friends".

The use of religious and secular formulas varied considerably according to gender and social distance (see figure 2). The female participants tended to use more religious formulas in contexts of SSD, 15.3%, but only 3.9% in contexts that involved LSD. Also, they used more secular formulas in contexts of SSD, 9.6% and only 5.8 in LSD contexts. The males used less religious formulas in contexts of SSD, (7.6%) than in LSD contexts,

(14.6), while they used more secular formulas in LSD contexts (2.1%) than in SSD contexts, (1.1%). Overall, the females used the indirect face saving secular formulas more frequently than the males did in both contexts of SSD and LSD.

Figure 2



Egyptian females and males use of religious and seculat formulas in response to compliments perceived as invocations of the evil eye

One strategy appeared to be gender specific: remodeling the compliment, as only the female participants employed it in responding to compliments perceived as invocations of the evil eye. In applying this strategy the recipient of the compliment repeats the utterance attaching a religious formula. According to the participants' metapragmatic insight into remodeling, the purpose of the repetition is to assure the other

interlocutor that the compliment had been accepted and appreciated, and the religious formula functions as a reminder that the compliment could have been better formulated with the formula to avoid any possible misinterpretation. At the same time, the formula functions as a protective measure against the potentially undesired and unintended consequences of the compliment. The remodeling strategy was used 10.8% in large social distance contexts and 12.5% in small social distance contexts, which indicates that the social distance between the interlocutors might not be a determining variable where remodeling is concerned.

The discussions with the interviewees revealed another pragmatic aspect related to the evil eye: euphemism. Many Egyptians employ figurative expressions to avoid mentioning "fearsome" phenomena such as 'the evil eye' lest it is invoked (Farghal, 1995.) The use of euphemisms varies according to the intended referent. For example, when referring to the evil eye, the speaker might say, "*el a'in*" (the eye), "*el karr*" (the call), or "*el nazzar*" (the glance). Also, when describing someone as envious, one might use "*a'enuh weHsha*" (he has a bad eye), "*a'enuh medawarah*" (his eye is round), "*a'enuh tindab fiha rusasah*" (his eye deserves a bullet in it), or "*karruh dakar*" (his invocation is male--to show intensity) among other euphemisms.

Discussion

The analysis revealed various compliment responding strategies; however, these strategies are used only when the recipient perceives the compliment as an invocation of

the evil eye usually when the utterance indicates envy or there are religious or secular formulas attached to it.. Recognizing the responding particular strategy would help the giver of the compliment to know how the recipient interpreted it, repair the utterance by adding the religious formula or stating that no envy is intended, "*allahuma la hassad*" (the lord be my witness, no invocation of the evil eye.)

The analysis suggests that Egyptians use two major types of strategies in response to the compliments in concern, face saving strategies and face threatening strategies. The first category includes complimenting and using humor that are believed to inhibit the work of the evil eye by pleasing the giver of the original compliment and thus establishing social equality and harmony. Two other responding strategies that fall under this category are complaints and evasion that attain the same function by denying being at advantage or in a better social status than that of the giver of the compliment. The purpose behind all these strategies is to maintain social harmony and equality that are cultural values cherished by most Egyptians as members of a high context culture (Hall, 1976). The second category, face threatening strategies, includes confrontation and the use of religious and/or secular formulas that are employed when the recipient of the compliment perceives it as a real threat or lack of caution on the side of the giver of the compliment. These strategies occur when the recipient sacrifices social harmony for the benefit of his/her well being. A third category includes only one strategy, remodeling, which is actually a combination of the two categories described above. Remodeling

functions as to save the face of the giver of the compliment by expressing gratitude and at the same time protects the recipient of the potential dangers of the compliment.

The overall patterns of the responses suggest that Egyptian females tend to exceed males in being keen on maintaining solidarity in contexts that involve small social distance. They would use more humor and compliments and at the same time less complaints and evasive responses to the compliment. In large social distance contexts, Egyptian females seem to be less keen on establishing solidarity, and therefore they would still employ face saving strategies that entail complaints and evasions. However, they would tend not to use humor and might resort to face threatening strategies and confrontations.

The analysis of the male participants' responses indicates that Egyptian males, unlike females, are keen on establishing solidarity in contexts that involve large social distance. For example, in such contexts they would employ face saving strategies such as humor and compliments more frequently than in small social distance contexts. Moreover, males would avoid confrontations in large social distance contexts while they would employ then relatively frequently in close relations. These findings suggest that there might be some shared cross-cultural patterns in male and female choices of communicative strategies in similar social contexts, (see Tannen, 1986 and 1994.)

The frequencies of male and female use of religious and secular formulas might seem to contradict the above discussed patterns. The males used religious formulas, a face threatening strategy, in large social distance more frequently than the females did.

Also, the females used these formulas in small social distance more frequently than the males did. That deviation could be accounted for in the light of the nature of these formulas that are used when one's well being is at the stake as a consequence of a compliment interpreted as a strong invocation of the evil eye. However, the females tended to use more secular formulas than the males did which indicates the Egyptian females tend to be more indirect than males.

Bearing in mind the extent to which most Egyptians, as well as many Arabs, consider invocations of the evil eye as horrifics, caution is advised when giving compliments to people from these cultures. Despite being a rather dangerous speech act, from that point of view, compliments are quite common among Egyptians and they can be a means of establishing good relationships and social harmony as in any other cultural context if properly phrased, and care is taken in their use. All the participants agreed that there is a main complimenting strategy that assures the recipient that their compliments are not ill-intended: attaching one of the various secular or religious formulas. This strategy is well documented in the literature, (see Nelson et al. 1993, Lane 1966, Early 1993, Winifred & Blackman 1968, and Fakhouri, 1984).

Conclusion

The study has revealed some of the communicative strategies used by Egyptians to respond to compliments that are perceived as invocations of the evil eye. An understanding of such strategies can be crucial for maintaining successful communication with Egyptians as well as most Arabs. Failure to recognize these strategies might lead to

miscommunications and communication breakdowns. For example, when complimenting an Egyptian the American might expect a "*shukran*" (thank you), but instead he/she might hear complaints that spurn the compliment. The importance of recognizing such strategies lies in the fact that they indicate a misinterpretation of the illocutionary force of the compliment, and offer the reconciling strategies required to save the relationship.

The findings of the study raise some questions for further research. For instance, the variable of social status was not addressed in this study because it is assumed that the person who invokes the evil eye is always at a lower status than that of the recipient of the compliment. However, the participants related situations where the invoker is at what is typically considered "higher status", such as a employer invoking the evil eye against an employee. It can be inferred that the attribute of the compliment is the criterion that decides on the status. For example, someone who is rich but unhealthy would be considered at a low status when health is the focus of the interaction. This supports Ghosh's assertion that anyone can be accused of being envious, (Ghosh, 1983). Therefore, it might be legitimate to claim that "social status" is a context-specific concept.

Social status is a variable that is included in many cross-linguistic speech-act studies, and it is often measured according to materialistic standards such as financial status and position in the professional hierarchy (e.g., employer-employee, teacher-student) Other aspects might carry more weight in regard of determining one's social status. For example in Egypt, education, religious observance, and family are aspects that

are valued higher than material achievement. Caution needs be taken while comparing different languages in terms of pragmatic strategies because the variables might be interpreted differently by the speakers of different languages.

This study was an attempt to account for some of the communicative strategies that lead to misunderstandings in contexts that involve intercultural communication with Egyptians. However, the study sheds light on other phenomena that needs investigation such as the role of religious and secular formulas in Arabs communication and the universality of gender specific patterns of communication across languages and cultures. More studies need be conducted on Colloquial Arabic in order to better understand it, and hence facilitate communication with its speakers.

Appendix 1

Religious and secular formulas related to the beliefs of the evil eye as reported in the interviews

Religious formulas related to beliefs of the evil eye

- *Allhu akbar*	God is great
- *Allhuma Sali a'ala elnabi*	God praise the Prophet.
- *Masha? Allah*	This is what the Lord willed
- *Uzkur ellah*	Remember [mention] God
- *Sali a'ala elli Hayeshfa' fik*	Praise for Him who will save you
- *Allah*	God
- *Allah yenawar*	God give you His light
- *Rabina yezeedak min na'eemuh*	May the lord increase you goods
- *Allahuma la hasad*	By God, no invocation is intended
- *Hatha min fadl rabi*	This is a boon of my lord
- *Bism elSalib*	In the name of the Cross
- *Qadim elmashi?a*	Prefix (your talk about your Achievement) with *"in- sha? Allah"* God willing.

Appendix 2

Secular formulas related to the beliefs of the evil eye

- *Imsik el khashab*	Hold wood [touch wood]
- *El ein sabitni wi rab ela'arsh nagany*	the evil eye struck me, but the Lord of the Throne seved me.
- *Ya nas ya shar kifaya karr*	O, people, enough invocations
- *Fi wish `adewak*	In the face of your enemy.
- *Xamsa wi xemisa*	five and five [the diminutive] related to the palm.
- *Matbuslish bea'en raDiya, buss lelli* what*Itdafa' fiya*	Don't behold me with evil eye. Behold what was paid for me. (complaint)
- *Ya nas ya ful, elrizk lelkul*	Oh people, Oh jasmine, sustenance is for all.

Appendix 3 The stimuli

Direction: You will hear descriptions of twelve different situations. After you hear each situation, say what you would say if you were is the situation described.

Small social distance

(1) You are holding family reunion at your house, and many of your relatives are present. One of them was observing your two year-old daughter and commented, "*elbint di a'leha zaka? Eldunia.*" (This girl has the world's intelligence in her." You say:

(2) It is Friday noon and you are on the way to the mosque (or Sunday and you are on your way to church) taking your teenage son with you. You run into your neighbor on the staircase, and he comments, "*el wad ibnak dah taqi gidan.*" (Your son is very religious!) You say:

(3) You are at the school where you teach, and it is the day when all teachers meet to grade the final examination papers. You are doing a very good job, and at a high rate of speed. One of your colleagues, who is a close friend of your, notices you and comments, "*inta lazem a'neek gamda awi. Inta mush beteta'ab abadan?*" (Your eyesight must be strong. Don't you ever get tires?)[1] You say:

(4) You have been hired by a well-established firm/school in the United Arab Emirates with a very high salary. Friends and relative have come to your house to see you off. One of them comments, "*away yaba. Mashya maa1ak akher halawa we hatea'melhum ikwam ikwam.*" (Lucky you! You will make real good money (piles). Good for you!)

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[1] The Egyptian Arabic compliment can be structured as rhetoric question, (Nelson et al, 1993).

You say:

(5) You are meeting with your friends in a restaurant/coffee-shop wearing your new suit/dress. One of them admires the suit/dress, and comments, "*Hilwa ?awy ilbadla/elfustan da. Di shaklaha min italya.*" (Wow! That suit/dress is fantastic. It looks like an Italian designer's.)

You say:

(6) You meet your neighbor whose son is a classmate of your son, and you discuss school matters. Then, he/she comments, "*rayah balak. Elwad ibnak dah mous mozakrah we a`aref maslaHtuh.*" (You have nothing to worry about. Your son is very industrious and he knows what is better for him.)

You say:

Large social distance

(1) You are on your way to work, and as usual going on foot. Someone you do not know seems to have a problem starting his/her car and asks you for a push. Once you put your shoulder to it, the engine starts. A by passer comments, "*dah inta a`lek seha tehid gibal.*" (Oh my! You have enough health to devastate mountains.)

You say:

(2) During a parents' meeting, you have a conversation with someone you have never met before. When he knows that you are a teacher, he comments, "*aywa ya salam, intu*

ya mudareseen betea`melu filous keterr." (That is nice. You teachers make a lot of money.)

(3) An official from the Ministry of Education comes to visit the school where you work, and he expresses an interest in observing your class. After the observation, he comments, *"meya meya ya ?ustaz. inta betekalem ilengelizy zay el-khawagat".* (That is impressive. You speak English just like native speakers."

You say:

(4) You are sitting in your office at work when an office mate starts a conversation about relationships. She comments, *"khateebek Tayeb ?awy. into mush betekhanqu anadan?"* (Your fiancé(e) is very kind. Don't you ever argue?)

You will say:

(5) You are standing in line at the bank teller's window waiting to be served. A person next to you chats to pass the time, and then she comments, *"ya`ni mudares inglizi, we a`ndak a`rabya we kanam bitdawar a`la shaqa? Ya bakhtak*". (So, you are a teacher of English, you have a car, and now looking for a house? Good for you.)

You say:

(6) You just bought a new sports car and driving it for the first time to work. A colleague sees you and comments, *"eeh ela`rabyat elfikhma di. Away ya a`am."* (What a great and luxurious car! Lucky you!)

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